

## Impact of Crisis in Russia–Ukraine Relations on Cross-Border Interactions in Belgorod Oblast

D. V. Zayats<sup>a</sup>, M. V. Zotova<sup>b, \*</sup>, N. L. Turov<sup>a</sup>, and M. I. Klyuchnikov<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Faculty of Geography, Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia*

<sup>b</sup>*Institute of Geography, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia*

\*e-mail: zotovam@bk.ru

Received February 16, 2017

**Abstract**—A case study of Belgorod and Kharkiv oblasts examines the current state of cross-border interactions between Russia and Ukraine after the 2014 crisis. Changes in socioeconomic indicators of the neighboring regions are evaluated, as well as their dynamics in response to the crisis in mutual political relations. Strengthening of border barrier functions is found to trigger curtailment of bilateral interactions and intensification of underground shadow types of professional and business activities. Analysis of the directions of cross-border population flows have revealed their asymmetry. Four principal dimensions of borderland cooperation are explored: infrastructural, institutional, economic, and social. A conclusion is drawn that in a setting of political crises, the infrastructural and institutional dimensions of cooperation are the most heavily impacted by external factors and are noticeably transformed. At the same time, economic and social interactions, though weakened, do not cease completely and retain the potential opportunity for restoring cooperation, given favorable conditions arise.

**Keywords:** Russia, Ukraine, cross-border cooperation, crisis, Belgorod oblast, Kharkiv oblast, economic ties

**DOI:** 10.1134/S2079970517040104

The Kharkiv–Belgorod metropolitan system is one of the most sensitive areas in the former Soviet Union in which disintegrating processes have been developing since the 1990s. The regional centers, with only 80 km driving distance from each other, were closely intertwined in terms of economy, transportation, and cultural ties. A number of researchers presumed that they will form a single dual-core urban agglomeration in the future [27]. Cross-border interactions were disrupted following the events of 2014, which heavily transformed the internal political structure of Ukraine. The current level of the barrier function for the complex of interactions between Belgorod and Kharkiv is unprecedented for the two cities' entire existence.

### RESEARCH STUDIES ON THE STATE BORDERS AND THE RUSSIAN–UKRAINIAN BORDERLAND

In recent years, border research studies abroad moved beyond classical theory, which was based on viewing *borders* as the established (fixed) lines, functioning as barriers; they now largely consider borders as a social construct that reflects the phenomena of economic, social, and cultural globalization [33, 37]. As a result, border communities are not perceived as

passive participants, but rather the actors with ample potential to influence the political system [31]. Therefore, borderland administration practices are often in thrall to liberal rhetoric on potential conflicts and perception of the latter [29]. The topic of border securitization has, nevertheless, regained its former importance, especially in the context of European countries increasingly having to walk a fine line between security and interests in overcoming barriers by means of cross-border interactions [32].

In the post-Soviet era, research on Russian–Ukrainian borderlands was primarily dedicated to spatial morphology, population geography, and urbanization [15, 18, 22, 23]. The works of L.B. Vardomsky, S.V. Golunov, V.I. Pantin, and V.V. Lapkin on interactions between Russia and Ukraine mainly focused on matters of economic and humanitarian cooperation between the parties to cross-border integration, i.e., supply chains, borderland trade, transport infrastructure, etc., as well as on social and cultural interactions, shining a spotlight on the wide range of political and geopolitical dimensions of the problem [4, 6–8]. The analysis of economic and social characteristics of border regions revealed a rise in socioeconomic gradients at the state border [15], notwithstanding the preconditions for creating a zone of contact have been met to facilitate integration of the two neighboring

states [23]. A.M. Anisimov et al., and V.A. Kolosov et al. emphasized the growing economic asymmetry and asynchrony of socioeconomic processes in the formerly coherent territory, which hampered integration and cross-border cooperation across post-Soviet states [1, 17]. In the Kolosov's opinion, the main factors that continue to motivate cross-border cooperation include favorable location of a border region relative to global transport and communication corridors and a pair of neighboring cities on both sides of a border with a formerly unified settlement system [25]. The challenges of cross-border cooperation were explored by N.L. Gavkalova and A.M. Kiryukhin through the lens of arranging euroregions in Russian–Ukrainian borderlands [10, 14]. A number of scientists consider euroregions to be an important integrative tool thus far, though in the Russian–Ukrainian border zone, they have, in fact, been nonoperational since 2014. V.N. Tisunova and A.A. Reznik believe that reinforcing and developing euroregions is a way to revive the disrupted economic and cultural ties between regions adjacent to the border [20, 26].

A central place in research studies on sociocultural characteristics of the Russian–Ukrainian borderlands is occupied by the works of M.P. Krylov, A.A. Gritsenko, T.A. Shul'gina, and G.G. Grinchenko in the field of regional and ethnocultural self-identification of the population within various national and political models that have evolved in Russia and Ukraine over the post-Soviet era [3, 13, 19, 21, 24, 28]. Krylov and Gritsenko examined features of national and cultural identity in border region residents, the modern perception of frontier territory, and its spatial pattern in light of the border factor effect [19]. Grinchenko validates a hypothesis for prevalent biocultural orientation of those living in borderlands and ethnic self-identity being partially overrode by a regional one; he also notes the shared identity of the Russian–Ukrainian borderland population and expansion of the cultural and civilizational frontier beyond the state border, to a greater extent on the Russian side [12, 19, 21]. At the same time, since the 2014 crisis, cultural differentiation has been growing, and new identity models have been emerging with divergent axiological patterns, as pointed out by V.P. Babintsev et al. [2].

Since 2014, the state border between Russia and Ukraine has been increasingly taking on the features of a frontal border, i.e., a clear cut separation line [35], which not only divides countries that put a freeze on diplomatic contacts or have badly strained relations, but also delineates the most important political fronts, such as military and political blocs [30]. Frontal borders tend to arise as a result of intractable ethnopolitical conflicts between parties that lay claim to the same territory [36], e.g., Georgia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia or the crisis in the Middle East. Frontal borders are commonly established as a consequence of armed conflicts and civil wars and usually separate territories that used to form part of a single state for an

extended period of time and developed close relations, which makes the severance even more abrupt, painful, and detrimental to border districts in particular. The unfolding events on the Russian–Ukrainian border bear a resemblance to the situation on some borders between the states of the former Yugoslavia, especially Serbia and Croatia, during the most intensely troubled periods of the 1990s. Now similar processes are visible on a number of borders in Southeastern Europe and Central Asia, such as between Serbia and the self-proclaimed Republic of Kosovo, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, etc. Currently, the strong barrier function of the Russian–Ukrainian border will apparently continue to dominate for an extended period of time, taking into account the absence of clear prospects for settlement in Donbass and the unwillingness of the Ukrainian political elite and a substantial segment of society to accept the loss of Crimea. This means that Russian regions neighboring Ukraine should be prepared to adapt the economy and society to a closed regime, which might persist throughout many years or even decades.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper concentrates on four primary dimensions of cross-border cooperation: infrastructural, which lays the physical foundation for cooperation; institutional, which provides the rules and framework for cooperation; and economic and social, which are the central conceptual elements of bilateral relations. The aim of the article is to evaluate the list and conditions of cross-border practices between Russia and Ukraine in one of the key sections, the zone of Belgorod–Kharkiv interaction, during the critical period in relations between the two countries, as well as the adaptation mechanisms.

The following materials from regional statistics were used as information sources: data open to public access from web portals of the former Federal Agency on the Establishment of the State Border of the Russian Federation (Rosgranitsa), Construction and Operational Management of Rosgranitsa Facilities (Rosgranstroï FGKU), as well as territorial agencies for the Border Guard Services and Customs Services of Russia and Ukraine; local media publications, blogs, and forums; field observations and a series of expert interviews conducted by the authors with persons representing public authorities, science, business, and nonprofit agencies of Belgorod oblast in January and February 2016.

## NATURE OF BILATERAL RELATIONS

### **Institutional dimension of cross-border cooperation.**

Even beforehand, borderland residents perceived the Russian–Ukrainian border as an additional institutional barrier that set the limits to an established pattern of life. It was not until the early 2000s that the